

October 25, 1997
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SEPTEMBER 1969: LESSONS FROM THE PENTAGON PAPERS

I had put off reading the earliest volumes of the Pentagon Papers till last, because I hadn't thought they were very relevant to the events of the Sixties. I hadn't even brought them back to Santa Monica till I returned from Washington and Haverford in late August. Early in September I began reading them, the account of our decision-making in "the First Indochina War," the "French" war.

When I had finished, a week or so later, I had learned (see Papers on the War, and PP volumes):

--There had not been two Indochina wars, only one, and it had been a US war from the beginning.¹

--The struggle was never a "civil war"(as doubters within the JFK and LBJ administrations thought privately). It was no more a civil war after 1955 or 1960 than it had been during the US-supported French attempt at colonial reconquest.

A war in which one side was entirely equipped and paid by a foreign power, which dictated the nature of the local regime in its own interest, was not a civil war. It was a war to impose foreign domination, on one side, and to resist it on the other. A war of aggression, ours.

--There never had been any legitimacy in our involvement or our war in Vietnam, nor any claim to authority for any of the regimes we backed, neither under the French nor later. Not in Vietnamese eyes, nor should there have been in our own eyes, if we had been informed and realistic about our role in past and present. Realistically seen, it was never a "just cause."

--After 1954, our policies ensured that armed struggle would resume. We had no more right to win that struggle than the French had had. And though like the French with US assistance we could prolong it year by year, we had no better prospect of winning that struggle than the French had had, which was zero.

--That last point had been presented by authoritative advisors to every President from Truman on. Each one had been told of the likelihood that their chosen approach (and by some, at least, that any approach) would be stalemated and only postpone departure and defeat, as convincingly as I had said this to officials of the Johnson Administration in 1966, '67 and '68, and to Kissinger in 1969.

Yet each of them had chosen to "soldier on," deceiving the public as to what he was doing and what he had been told its prospects were, preferring stalemate to withdrawal but trying effectively to win while accepting some constraints.²

--This experience offered no hope of influencing a president to extricate the US from Vietnam by getting realistically pessimistic estimates before his eyes. Recent presidents had heard what I and likeminded field observers had to tell them and they had chosen to go ahead anyway. Why they all did this (including Nixon, I had just learned from Mort Halperin) wasn't entirely clear, but the pattern was reliable.

--If US policy was to be shifted toward extrication, that would have to be done by pressure from the outside. It would have to come from former officials, who understood past errors and could recognize their recurrence, or from a mainstream public that had somehow been informed, educated, about the past presidential aims and patterns about which they had been lied to and kept ignorant, and informed persuasively about Nixon's present intentions and their prospects. (Leftists who sensed all this from a radical perspective and young people were unlikely to be sufficiently influential).

--I drew from the Pentagon Papers (and from Truman's behavior in the Korean War, and earlier the behavior of all the statesmen in World War I) that no president was likely to close out a war without victory if he could foresee that he would bear sole or primary responsibility for the defeat. That meant that only a new president who was not responsible for earlier decisions was likely to end a stalemated war, and that only in his first months or first

year in office, before the war had become "his."³ And even so he would probably need assurance from his rivals in his own party and in the opposition that they would share responsibility for the decision and would not use it against him in the next election.

--The former officials from the Democratic opposition would have to accept, against their instincts, both that extrication was now the appropriate course and of overriding interest, and that their own public dissent from impending presidential policy was essential and worthwhile. Even harder for them, they would have to take most of the blame for the predicament that forced such a choice on the new president, and convince him of their willingness to share responsibility for shifting course and for the consequences of this.

--Disagreeing this publicly and sharply from the policies of presidents I had worked for (including the present one) made it unlikely that I would be able to work for a president again, which up till now had been my highest ambition. But reading the Pentagon Papers on the disastrous behavior of four presidents in Vietnam, and reflecting on my own experience with the last two in that light, had burned out of me the desire to work for presidents, to be a "President's man."

That amounted to a shift in identity, which made it possible for me--much easier, no doubt, than for most of the former

officials I was appealing to--to contemplate forms of opposition to present policy that were likely to bar me from future employment in the Executive branch. That consequence--not a fear of prison--was the salient and sufficient deterrent that kept most of my colleagues from considering actions that went beyond a certain point.⁴

END NOTES

1. We had supported French aims and operations from the start, and participated in them with operations (shipping), resources and money. We did this, at first, with some reluctance, in order to strengthen our relations with the French (and British) to advance US policies in Europe. But after Communist victory in China (the "fall of China") in late 1949, even before the rise of McCarthyism in early 1950, we saw preventing Communist control of Indochina (and protecting the Democrats from the charge of "losing another area to Communism") as our cause and stepped up our aid and intervention.

Ironically, this was just at the moment that the French effort at reconquest had become, in Vu Van Thai's phrase, "Sisyphean," with the opening of the Chinese border to aid to the Viet Minh independence movement from the Chinese Communists. And the French had become disheartened (realistic) about their prospects about the same time and wanted out. From that time on, they were more US instruments than allies in this struggle, with the US urging and demanding that they continue, and providing, eventually, 85% of the funding.

Thus, the French effort at colonial reconquest was a French/US effort throughout, eventually more US than French except for the troops, which included Indochinese mercenaries under the French. The US was imposing on the Vietnamese our values for them: "Better French (and at war; or dead) than Red."

American officials were sincere in their belief, then as later, that these values were really best for the Vietnamese, as well as for the US. And there was some realistic basis for the belief that many Vietnamese were naive and misled in their notions of what a Communist-led victory would do for them, the likelihood that it would lead to Communist domination and what that would mean. But these American officials were no less ignorant or self-deceptive about the nature of French rule or of the various Saigon regimes we supported or imposed later, or the incentives that would lead people to take up and persist in armed struggle against greatly superior forces. In any case, to presume to judge what was best for them, with life and death at stake, was the height of imperial arrogance, the arrogance of power as Fulbright later called it.

Moreover, many Vietnamese who supported the Viet Minh and later the NLF were not at all unaware of the shortcomings and costs of Communist leadership and probable rule. They simply saw no alternative path to independence, which they judged to be worth the cost. Indeed, Tran Ngoc Chau recently told me that it was precisely US support to the French in the earliest days that convinced many Vietnamese they must accept Communist leadership of

the resistance, in order to get Soviet (and later Chinese) help. Chau said that if they had been fighting the French alone, they would not have needed outside help so urgently, and they would have preferred other leadership.

By this view, had the US not backed French colonialism in 1945 (and FDR in 1943 had been inclined to oppose it, in favor of international trusteeship leading to independence, though even FDR had apparently abandoned this desire just before he died, in the interests of reassuring the French and also the British, who also wanted to preserve their colonies), the ensuing struggle against the French would not have sucked in the US in the guise of opposing a Communist-led movement.

As it was, Chau points out, the US acquired an ineradicable taint in Vietnamese eyes, of which Americans were scarcely aware, as allies and crucial supporters of French colonial efforts. Later American support of a nominally "independent" regime in Saigon, actually an American creation and creature, did nothing to change this image, which was a fatal handicap in later efforts to destroy the reconstituted Vietnamese independence movement.

2. JFK in '62, hope of winning short of sending US troops; LBJ, short of war with China or nuclear weapons; Nixon, without these subjective constraints, at least on threats, but held back, like LBJ after Tet, by antiwar sentiment, and focussed on "winning" in the form of a prolonged, "cheap" stalemate rather than the total destruction of the NLF or its expulsion from the countryside.

3. Another possibility was a second-term president, who would not be standing for election again. Thus, JFK told Senator Mike Mansfield and his assistant Kenneth O'Donnell early in 1963 that it was his intention to withdraw from Vietnam in 1965, after winning reelection in 1964. He foresaw a McCarthyite outcry even then, but felt he could take it in 1965, though not in 1963 or 1964. But he was unwilling to accept a defeat in the remaining two years of his first term, even though he had come to believe that the effort was hopeless.

4. Nearly all such officials preserve the hope of serving officially in future administrations, in their own parties or even under the opposing party, whether as officials, ambassadors, members or chairmen of panels, or at least as consultants, with access to officials and to privileged information. They protect their credentials as "responsible" candidates for such trust and service literally to their dying day.

Maintaining their availability for future positions of trust is perfectly compatible with being publicly critical of particular current policies, especially of the opposition party, so long as this observes certain limits. There must be no serious criticism of the past policies of administrations in which they served, and

especially of presidents from their own parties. No revelation of secrets, no embarrassing quotations. Above all, no imputation that a president or other high official lied or broke the law, or acted in a morally questionable manner, or acted in matters of war and peace for reasons of political self-interest.

I knew what I was doing to my future employability when I came to violate all these constraints. And by the same token, I could understand the reserve of current officials or those who still wanted to preserve their official access and influence and prospects of future careers, even though I had concluded that such restraint was incompatible with acting effectively to end our involvement. But the degree of self-censorship even in late-life, post-retirement memoirs by former officials remains striking.

A friend of mine, frustrated by the reluctance of non-profit organizations in the peace movement to risk steps that might endanger their relations with the IRS, once conjectured that the only thing that would survive World War III was the tax-exempt status of certain non-governmental organizations.

Likewise, most former officials seem to desire, virtually on their death beds, that their reputation for responsibility and discretion will survive them. Perhaps they have hopes of being "channelled" as advisors to future presidents from the afterlife.